10 Tips for Songwriters

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Introduction

At my songwriting blog, www.songwright.co.uk, I often interview songwriters. I find one of the best ways to get yourself inspired and excited about songwriting is to find out how someone else does it.

That's what this book is all about.

It was written by 18 successful songwriters who wanted to share their 10 tips for songwriting.

Have they all written commercial hits? Have they had their songs performed by famous singers, or sold a billion records?

No, for the most part they haven't, but what sort of a way to measure success is that?

These 18 people have all proved themselves successful at writing songs. They wrote them for a myriad of reasons, to express themselves, to earn a living, to impress their friends, for a songwriting community, to practice their craft or simply because they could.

Each of the contributors has their own way of writing songs. There are writers here who start with the lyrics, and others who start with the music. Some are theory experts, others wouldn't know a bar line from a bass clef. Some know their way around a recording studio, others can just about manage a cd player.

Each one has contributed their 10 tips for writing songs – the 10 things that they think should matter most to songwriters.

Some agree on the basics, others have very different priorities. Some you might think are stating the obvious, others might be saying something you've never thought of before.

But I know that no two readers will agree on which are the most important tips here.

So, you can read the book all the way through, or you can flip to a random songwriter and find out what they have to say. Either way, it is my hope that you'll find something interesting or inspiring on each and every page.

I've found talking to songwriters one of the most rewarding things I can do for my own songwriting, I hope you do to.

Tom Slatter

Tom Slatter is a singer songwriter who also writes a blog about songwriting. His first solo album ***Spinning the Compass*** *was released in January 2010*

www.songwright.co.uk
www.tomslatter.co.uk

T.C. Elliot

T.C. Elliott is married to a wonderful woman and has two great daughters. He's been playing guitar for 20 years and writing songs almost as long. T.C. plays in a local all original band and is currently on a quest to write a Song A Week in 2010.

1. Collaborate.

If you already collaborate then find someone new or use a different method. Even if you find that you truly don't enjoy it you can still learn quite a bit.

2. Read Books.

If you want to improve your craft read some books by successful songwriters. If you want to break into the songwriting business (say in Nashville) find books about the music business. I highly recommend "The Business and Craft of Songwriting" by Braheny for both. If you sing on your own demos find a few quality vocal/singing books and read them. Even if you are an accomplished singer, unless you've had vocal lessons (and sometimes even if you have) these books will be very beneficial. And don't forget the public library usually is a great place to start.

3. Learn to play a (new) musical instrument.

If you are a lyricist with no instrumental training it will be a benefit to learn an instrument. Even if you only dabble it is very useful. A few piano lessons in playing and in theory will go a long way into helping get your ideas across to an instrumentalist. If you already play an instrument then pick up a new one. Either learn to play or just try to make music on it. Either way you are sure to get more ideas.

4. Listen to music you normally wouldn't.

Do you generally avoid country? Find a friend who likes it and ask them for a few discs of their favorite country songs. Do this with any genre you aren't as familiar with. Listen and ask yourself what about this music touches the listener. If nothing else you can incorporate standard techniques in another genre into your normal songwriting and make it sound fresh and new... or give your songwriting a new flair. This is a great way to get out of a songwriting rut or to break the writer's blockade.

5. Write a song in a different way.

Do you normally start with a musical idea, hook or chord progression? Write or borrow a lyric and try to set it to music. Do you normally take a lyric and then put it to music? Try to write an entire song's music before even starting on the lyric. Have a verse, chorus and bridge section ready. Sometimes the music will tell you what kind of lyric it wants.

6. If you start with music (or are trying suggestion #5 right there up above this one) try starting with drums or a bass.

Get the rhythm first or try to get a groove on the bass. Every time I try starting with bass I enjoy it and yet I very seldom remember to do it. It's another great way to keep the songwriting process fresh or to break the songwriting blockade.

7. Take a walk.

Exercise. And drink lots of water. Are you stuck? Take the dog for a walk or just wander around the neighborhood. Try to let your mind relax and enjoy the scenery. If it's very cold or very hot don't dally too long, but be sure you soak in some nature. Are you not stuck? Then remember, a little more exercise clears the body and the mind. Water is the best way to make yourself feel better and if you sing while writing and/or recording your vocal chords will be happier as well.

8. Try to have a place and time to write songs.

If it is an hour every day at more or less the same time you may find that your brain starts writing songs before you ask it to. It's a great way to avoid writer's block before it even starts. Have a place that has an instrument or a notebook or a typewriter or a computer or a tape recorder. Whatever you need to get your ideas down make sure it's in a nice place, well organized, that you can use. Nothing sucks so

much as to have that great idea slip away while trying to find a pen to write it down. I generally write most of my songs on Tuesdays and Saturdays. I work long hours four days a week. So instead of having an hour a day, I try to take a couple of hours a couple of days a week. And then I squeeze in more songwriting time whenever time permits on other days.

9. Try to write honestly.

This doesn't mean to write only factual songs. In fact I think it is easier to see the truth when you can make the setting or plot of your song perfectly suited to what you want to say. But it does mean that you should avoid writing about things or in ways that you don't truly feel. If a listener doesn't believe you mean it they will not be touched emotionally. And music is nothing if not a direct line to our emotions. Don't lie to the listener and more importantly don't lie to yourself.

10 a. Take another look.

Are you done with that song? Take a break. A few days or even a week. Come back and take a critical look. Evaluate the song and ask yourself what could be improved. A clean perspective and one more coat of polish will never hurt. It may not always help, but it will never hurt.

10 b. If you have friends or a songwriter's circle that helps you evaluate your songs. Consider carefully all of their suggestions.

Try to figure out what they like best and worst. But then decide for yourself if or how the songs needs to change. If you have a pretty decent song and make every change that is suggested without truly evaluating the benefit or appropriateness, you will most likely lose whatever made the song pretty good before you ever get the song to great.

Edwin Songsville

Edwin Songsville has written over 150 songs in pop, rock, jazz and folk styles. Of those, there might be ten pretty good ones. He also has a secret prog-rock identity as infrawild, whose new album "un-" is out now and is played entirely on bass guitar, a futuristic-neolithic concept album that sounds a lot better than you'd think ...

www.songsville.org,

www.infrawild.com

1. Write bad songs

It's more important to write lots of songs that it is to spend ages trying to make one perfect one. You look at all the good songwriters and you realise they've written hundreds of songs. That's how you get good at it. As Diane Warren, possibly the world's most successful songwriter says: "My secret? I show up. That's it." Six days a week, she writes songs, and has been doing so for 30 years. Her very earliest songs? "They all sucked". So write often, a song a week is a good start. Make time for youself to have a few regular one-hour slots in your schedule to just write songs. And finish them! Even if they're not going to turn out great, get in the habit of finishing ... Expect 10 bad songs for every pretty good one. Yes, that's the kind of stats you are up against. The Outliers book by Malcolm Gladwell suggests 10,000 hours of practice gets you to a high level in pretty much any profession. You do the math! Events like fawm.org and the 50/90 and song a week and so on are really great things for this.

2. Throw away the good bits

Delete, delete, delete. You've written an OK line but it's not going anywhere -- so just scrub it out and move on quickly without a further thought. This is so hard to do but once you see the benefits of being ruthless it really pays off. Many thanks to Stacey Be of Airheart who did this during a cowrite we were doing, it really helped me. Even great lines have to go sometimes as they're just not in the right place at the right time, not right for the song. Always honour the song and it will honour you.

3. Don't write songs

The gold standard is still a great album, so think in albums, not songs. Get a concept and a mood board of ideas and vocabulary and an overall arc the suite of 12 songs has to take. You'll find yourself having to write much more on demand "OK, today we need a big ballad for track 6" and that's a level you need to be able to work at, popping out songs to order rather than just what drops into your lap.

4. Be bad at playing your instrument

Everyone will tell you to get better at your instrument, and as a very primitive musician myself I was very pleased to learn major and minor seventh chords etc, that sort of thing extends your musical vocabulary. But I meet many people who are so seriously trained in their instruments that they feel bad messing around, immediately reject stuff because it breaks some musical theory, worry about making a mistake while improvising etc. That's also bad. Brian Eno also likes the energy and naivety created when the drummer plass bass or the bassist plays guitar for instance. It's pop music, not the LSO. Pick up an unfamiliar instrument and see what comes out. You'll love it.

5. Have poor quality gear

Since about 2005, even cheap gear is plenty good enough. The preamps in your audio interface are likely to be ropey though, so try and do better. But everything else can be in the box and you can't really hear the difference until you are above a thousand quid each for mics, preamps etc and by the time it's all in a mix probably not even then. The songwriting is about a billion times more important than gear. If you want to treat yourself, go to courses and retreats like www.uksongwritingfestival.com or www.londonsongwriters.co.uk and if you do buy, buy good stuff -- it lasts and you can rely on it for 20 years and resell it easily.

6. Songs aren't even important anyway

I'm always inspired inspired by the Brian Eno quote: "What matters in modern music is not the part you can write down, the words and the tune, but the rest -- the texture, the atmosphere, the references and associations" ... think about the overall band message and identity, and craft images, songs and noises that bring that to the listener.

7. Be weird and obtuse

People will tell you to use natural language, be clear what you're saying etc. But distinctiveness is vital, the holy grail. You can't get there by being bland. I wrote a song at the UK SWF08 and had the amazing good fortune to be able to do a playback of it to Richard Thompson who was guest of honour that day. I thought it was quite obtuse already but he urged me to "make it more obscure" -- I had called it "White Horse Hill" but after that I went back to my original concept from the day before and renamed it "Under The Eye Of The White Horse" which nobody I had told it to understood, but I now realise that's actually a good sign -- let people unlock the mystery themselves and they will appreciate it more...

8. Ignore criticism

Many thanks to everyone who ever comments on any of my songs, but let's face it, comments are mostly rubbish: "I like it", "Great bass", "Good singing" etc are very sweet but nothing about the actual song, music, structure or lyrics. To top this, we often only show people songs when we have finished them and are frankly unlikely to make any significant changes. You know if it's a good one. If it's not great, chuck it on the pile or on reverbnation or myspace. Monitor the number of plays now and then as occasionally something you don't expect to be is popular. Be your own critic and editor, no-one else will do it for you.

9. Give up the idea that songwriting will make you rich

Well, it won't make you poor exactly. You will be enriched in many ways and enrich the lives of others. But treat it like a hobby not an income. Don't think that you will make money from having a 'hit' cause that's not how it works nowadays. Professional songwriting is like any job -- a load of hard graft and networking and internal politics and is generally just like the day job you already have and don't like. Letting go of any thoughts of fame and fortune or second-guessing what the market wants is very freeing and allows you to simply have fun and enjoy it. And you'll probably write better songs as a result.

10. Co-writing is great

I actually agree with everyone on this. You might not always make super duper songs (not first time out anyway), but the learning experience from cowriting with others is immense. Eternal thanks to the dozen or so people who have so far co-written with me. Let's do it again! Or drop me a songseed -- a snippet of a lyric or melody idea -- and if it resonates and takes sprout we can see where it takes us!

Errol

Errol composes not entirely serious songs on geek related subjects. You can hear them at www.geeklovesongs.com

1. Creativity can be practiced.

Always create, always sing, always write, always play, always indulge yourself in making stuff up.

2. Laugh more.

Daniel Pink's book "A Whole New Mind" has a whole section on "Play", and makes the claim that joyful people are more creative. Not to say that we ignore the other emotions, but I don't agree with the image of the suffering artist.

3. If you cannot find inspiration, then you are restricting yourself.

The world is banal only because you have stopped paying attention.

4. Like what you create.

Your first audience is you because hopefully, you know what you like. Other people may not like what you like, but don't worry about it. Your purpose in life isn't to make everyone you.

5. Don't be elitist.

It's ok to not like a genre, a style, a voice. But yours isn't intrinsically better just because you like it and others are talentless hacks. In fact, you can learn from those other 'types' that may be 'beneath' you. If not, then see #3.

6. Collaborate with other people.
Music can be done with more than one person. Share. Often. Don't be too afraid or too proud to learn from others.

7. Finish your songs.
If you feel you want to save the awesome riff for a 'better' song, then steal it from yourself later. If you feel the words are clumsy in one part, no one listens to the words anyway. Just finish the song. If the song is strong enough in your repetoire that you repeat it enough, then you can change the song.

8. Listen and support other people.
If you hang out with other songwriters, they want to push their stuff just as much as you do. If it is clearly just a one way street, don't be offended if they no longer wish to listen.

9. Criticism – learn how to use it.

Your worth as a human individual is not based on your talents, so don't internalize the high school popularity mentality. Some may be right on how to make your song better, your voice better, your lyrics better. There may also be a level of talent which you cannot achieve. Deal with it and get on with what you can.

10. Music is communal.

It is meant to be heard by others. Learn to interact with others, accept others, and even enjoy others that are different from you.

Marie Tueje

Marie is a multi-instrumentalist, composer and songwriter. She has composed soundtracks for radio, theatre, and film working with Banbury Theatre Company, Development Lab and Channel Four.

www.marietueje.com

1. Listen to everything; be a critic

Broaden the range of music you listen to it. Whatever genre you write in and personally enjoy, listening to music from different genres and figuring out what you like - and, in particular don't like - about music will greatly improve your ability to express yourself musically, which will in turn improve the quality of your songwriting. Ask yourself why you dislike something; is it the melody? If so, how would you write it differently. Or maybe you'd choose a different harmonic structure, or the perspective from which the lyrics are written. Use your criticism skills to improve the songwriting choices you make.

2. Learn from others

Following on from figuring out what you like and dislike about certain types of music comes actually sitting down and studying songs that you like, songs that interest you, and songs that perhaps you wish you'd written. Whether done by ear, with the aid of a YouTube "how to" video or sheet music, working out the intervals that make up the melody, learning the chords, or by doing a full-on reconstruction, understand what works (for you) in a song. The old adage about learning the rules before you break them is true for 99% of us mortal folk.

3. Improvement turns failure into success

Improve your musical skills and, if you're a lyricist, your prose writing skills. Its not about being virtuoso or "the best", but about personal improvement and being better able to articulate your artistic ideas. So don't think you have to practice guitar, piano or singing for four hours a day to improve, but however you choose to do it, make a commitment to improve over a period of time. This principle is true regardless of good you are; you can always get better and, in recognising that we can improve we open our minds to success. Improving your technical skill level will allow you to understand and control your creative side which will bring you closer to expressing yourself more naturally through songwriting.

4. Music is pleasure

Unless you've been specifically commissioned, write music that excites you, that moves you, and that you (and your friends) love. Why try and write music with the aim of maybe pleasing someone you don't know, and probably never will? Figure out what gets you going first. Writing hits and commercial music is great and good, and rewarding in its way, but appreciate and cultivate what nourishes you as a writer and as a listener. Chances are if you do that, others will respond to the music that you create and connect with it in a more natural way.

5. Aspire to greatness, but aim to achieve

Every song you write is an accomplishment, but not every song you write will be great, or even good. However, each song is an incremental plot on your improvement graph. That's each song written, not each chorus, or bridge or intro that's been gathering cobwebs for years. The more songs you finish, the more power and energy and shape you give to your achievements. If you tell your mum 'Hey, I wrote a great bridge section today', she may give you an appreciative thumbs up, but how much more impressed would she be if you say 'listen to this new song I finished today'. Doesn't matter if it's not perfect, she will be way more impressed, and the sense of achievement will be an inspiration and motivation to carry on and finish the next one, and the one after that. Plus, like almost everything; the more you do it, the easier it gets!

6. Be inspired

You can't wait to be inspired. Well you could, but just don't expect your songwriting light to be "on" when your inspiration drive kicks in. For that reason, dialing into your inspiration pool is a proactive step towards improved songwriting. The most mundane of topics can produce the

most elastic results, it all depends on your point of view.

7. Learn from others

Collaborating is an invaluable way of learning from others inadvertently, i.e. I don't advocate it being the purpose of your collaboration, but merely a healthy part of the process. Collaborators bring different skillsets, mindsets and working practices to the table, which will force you to continually reassess your own approach to your craft, and hopefully lead you to improve your own songwriting skills.

8. The money shot

Although I would have defined it a little differently, according to Wikipedia.org, a money shot is "a provocative, sensational or memorable sequence in a film, on which the film's commercial performance is perceived to depend." OK, let's just take the memorable and sensational part of that definition (although for commercial success provocative also works). Songs are three and a half minutes of, mainly aural, stimulation. They are also extremely formulaic and we respond to them because we are, by and large, used to their form and know what to expect. And that's fine for 3 minutes 20 seconds of your 3 and-a-half minute song. But if, for even 10 seconds, you can interrupt that sense of formality and introduce the listener to something they were not expecting, you have created a memorable moment in that song, triggering the listener's perception; and there's your sensation. When people can remember a song, and remember that they felt something when they heard it, they are more likely to look forward to hearing it again. This often true even when the associated sensation would read as "negative". Creating money shots within your songs increases the richness and depth of your songs, which helps to make them better songs.

9. Different strokes

As well improving skills on your principal instrument, writing songs on instruments that you don't play well (or even at all) stimulates your creative, "right side brain". And anything that stimulates creativity should help you on your songwriting journey, because for all this talk of formulas and learning from what other people have done, there is absolutely no substitute for:

10. Being creative

Whatever that means. To me, it means having both an element of originality (which would include being original within the framework of a long-standing tradition) and a degree of purpose; which, to me, just means that somebody likes it. If you really get off on the music you make the chances are that somebody else will too (see point 3), so that covers purpose. But being original? that's the hard part. And as for marrying the two? That's even harder still.

Helen Robertson

Helen is a mainstay of the London FAWM and 50/90 community. She has a band named Helen's Evil Twin who have been described as 'Slightly odd but very good '

http://www.myspace.com/helenseviltwin

1. Write some crap.

To beat writer's block, write the worst song you can. Take no more than an hour over it and include all the things you really hate in other songs. It will be a terrible song, but will help you purge the crap out.

2. Freedom is Slavery.

Constraints are your friend. If the tempo, or the key, or the genre, or the subject matter, or anything else are already decided before you start to write, you have much less messing about to do once you get started. It's like the difference between trying to find a needle in a haystack and trying to find a needle in a field.

4. Listen to lots of music.

Think about what you like and what you don't like about it, although sometimes just enjoying the music without the critical mind is important too.

5. Don't try to compare yourself to other songwriters.

Either you like them, in which case you're unlikely to come off all that favourably in your own mind, or you don't, in which case the comparison is pointless.

6. Steal ideas.

A great starting point for a song, is a hook from someone else's song. Change it a little, put it in a different context, a different genre, a different instrument. Most of the time people won't notice that you stole it. If they do, claim that it's a pastiche or an homage.

7. Join in with a community.

Nothing is more motivating than people cheering you on. Find a group or some friends who will support you and give you a kick up the arse when you start flagging.

8. Collaborate.

Collaborating with another songwriter has the advantages of the community and of the theft. Someone will cheer you on while you steal their ideas.

9. Don't make it all about you.

Try writing from the point of view of a friend, or an historical figure, or someone you really disagree with. The results might surprise you.

10. Throw away the rhyming dictionary.

Seriously, unless you're doing comedy ditties, perfect rhymes are really annoying and should only be used where they seem like the natural thing to say (ie where you'd use them in conversation).

11. Make up your own rules. Don't listen to me.

Billy Sea

Billy Sea makes country/folk music, christian/gospel music and warped hillbilly goat music.

http://www.myspace.com/seabill

http://www.myspace.com/seabilly1

http://www.myspace.com/travellinghillbillygoats

1. Never worry about quality when you are songwriting.

In many cases I do not know whether I like one of my songs until I'm done so I just write (knowing that the "likeability" factor will sort itself out later).

2. Do not expect to make money from songwriting.

Most songwriters don't and those that do rarely make enough to live off. To date, I've made $20 and 2 Ben and Jerry's coupons off my music. We won't talk about what I've spent.

3. Understand right up front that skills with instruments, singing, mixing, mastering, etc., are NOT part of songwriting.

You'll likely pick up expertise in these areas, and if you are like me, you'll likely outsource many of these when the time comes to do something with your favorite creations.

4. Create a basic song template.

Mine is verse 1, verse 2, chorus, verse 3, repeat chorus (4 lines for each).

5. Totally abandon your basic song template anytime you feel like it.

Let the song/story dictate its own structure.

6. Join http://fawm.org.

Your growth as a songwriter will be put on the fast track by simply being around all the talented folks that hang out there.

7. Turn off your inner critic when writing a song, turn it back on when you've finished the song.

There are very few songs I've written that I don't share simply because of content, but after I've finished the song if I think it would unnecessarily hurt someone, I won't share it.

8. Don't be afraid to reuse ideas.

Especially if the first song attempts with that idea didn't turn out to be a "keeper".

9. Write at any place and at any time.

The muse is always whispering to you if you just learn to listen. I keep paper/pen on my nightstand, in my office, in my car, etc. I jot down what I hear (word, line, verse, etc) and finish it later. The more you write songs, the better you will get.

10.The single most important key to songwriting is songwriting.

Susan Wenger

Susan Wenger sings, plays keyboard, and writes songs for the acoustic rock band Cinder Bridge. Their song "Everybody Knows About Me" was recently used in the ME/CFS Phoenix Rising Video to promote awareness about ME/CFS, and they will be recording their second album soon.

www.myspace.com/cinderbridge

1. Set a goal regarding how many songs you will write in a given amount of time, and commit to it.

The idea isn't to grind out as many tunes as you can in a short period of time. The idea is to pick a number just high enough to be challenging, but not so high that you're stressing yourself out trying to make quota. The objective is to constantly be writing.

Why? Because when you're always working on some song or another, your mind gets into the habit of running every experience through the "hey, that could be a song" filter. You'll come to recognize good material without having to think about it too hard.

2. Write while doing some mindless task.

This is the best remedy ever for the angst that accompanies writer's block. If you sit down and do nothing but attempt to write, you may feel frustrated when you don't produce anything. If you fail to find a rhyme while completing some other necessary task, you don't feel so bad, because hey, you've completed the task. And once it isn't painful to fail, it isn't scary to try again.

I did most of my early writing while riding my bike. If I'd attempted to work at my desk or the piano, I don't think I'd have finished even one song.

3. Do you have a specific message you want to convey in your song? Take a step back and listen to your lyrics as though you were somebody else.

You interpret your own words within the context of your personal experiences. Other people won't, and they might miss some basic theme that you think is obvious.

4. Subtly provide context instead of spelling everything out.

Say you've written a somewhat impressionistic line. It sounds really cool, but it doesn't make a whole lot of sense. If you recast the passage so the meaning is more explicit, you lose the poetic feel.

Leave the passage the way it is. To help careful listeners understand it, include other lines here and there that give clues as to what the passage means.

5. Don't make your song too long.

Note that I didn't specify a length. I'm not talking about cutting your song down to 3:05 so that it's radio-friendly. I'm talking about making sure it doesn't start to get boring at some point. Use all the notes you need to hold your listeners' attention -- and no more.

6. To prevent bloat, figure out the ideal structure of your song once you have the basic melody.

Lyrics often want to be longer than the music can justify. If you're not careful, the song can drag on and on as you tell your story in great detail. To guard against that, figure out the ideal musical structure for your song -- how many verses, how many choruses, and whether there will be a bridge -- before you've written a lot of the lyrics.

Forcing yourself to tell your story in fewer words requires discipline and creativity, but it's much less painful than deleting words you've already written.

7. Turn your inner critic into an ally.

Many experienced writers will advise you to create lousy first drafts. Just get something down, they say, and edit later. That way you don't become paralyzed by that pesky internal editor that says everything you do is crap.

This is probably a great technique for a lot of people. I've never been able to do it, though.

If you're in the same boat, don't despair. Make a deal with that voice in your head: it can speak up whenever one of your ideas doesn't meet its standards of excellence, but it can't attack you personally. "That rhyme doesn't mean what you want it to mean" is fine. "You suck at this" is out of bounds.

Because, guess what. If you can tell the difference between an idea that works and an idea that doesn't? Chances are you don't suck at this.

8. Don't be too much of a control freak.

Unless you sing and you play ALL the instruments, you'll need the help of other musicians to get your song performed and recorded. Give the people working with you room to be creative -- even if you have a clear vision of what you want it to sound like. At worst, you'll have to ask them to try something else. At best, they'll take your song to wonderful places you never dreamed of.

9. Before you decide to use a line you've written, sing it out loud.

Do the words sound good? Do they feel good to sing? If not, keep trying. The feel of the words is every bit as important as the meaning. To be completely honest, it's more important.

As a songwriter who obsesses over the significance of each word, it pains me to say that. But it's true. Listeners will forgive lyrics for not making sense when they are beautiful. In fact, they may not even realize the lyrics don't make sense.

10. Trust your own process.

A lot of songwriting advice seems to get packaged in terms of absolutes. NEVER do X. ALWAYS do Y.

Thing is, everyone is different. If any of these suggestions don't resonate with you, or you try one and it doesn't work, discard it. If your method for writing songs is different than everybody else's, so be it.

The end result is what matters. If you're creating music you love, you're doing it right.

Kevin Emmrich

Kevin Emmrich is a country, rock and blues songwriter from Virginia, USA.

www.soundclick.com/bands/page_music.cfm?bandID=620106

1. write a lot of songs

You can't get better without doing it a lot and this way you don't get so emotionally tied to one song.

2. study craft and write songs to different "forms"

(V-V-V, V-C-V-V-C, V-C-V-C-Br-C, etc.)

3. Take your 5 favorite songs and write "ghost lyrics" to them, steal the melody and form from the original.

This will uncover the styles that make good songs.

4. Co-write as much as possible.

Except for the performing artist, this is the current business model.

5. Don't whine, moan, groan and complain in your songs.

Everyone has problems, I don't need to hear yours also. If you insist on writing about problems, then write about mine.

6. Write lyrics that say something.

Don't write lame poetry or gibberish that I can make out to be about me and my experience. I am really not that interested in you (ha, ha).

7. Don't write a song with seven verses.

That went out a long time ago and it wasn't even that good back then. If you are going to bore me, at least make it interesting.

8. Try and rhyme for god's sake.

Rhyming allows the ear to hang on to phrases and makes them memorable. If you think rhyming is passe, then just stand outside the student library and recite your stuff to the birds that have assembled there.

9. Don't rhyme for rhyming's sake and don't rhyme like Dr, Suess for god's sake.

Use imperfect rhymes, near rhymes and perfect rhymes. Mix it up. Make sure the rhymes support the story.

10. Don't be boring

11. Bonus: Write a lot of songs.

Gary Jugert

Gary Jugert lives in Denver and plays piano, but he's not sure he'll ever be any good at either of those. He likes ukulele, harmonica, and wasting time. He works for Starbucks, writes fiction, and reads history.

http://www.mammothgardens.com/

1. Know the difference between bourbon and whiskey.

A songwriter needs the proper tools.

2. Buy a king-sized bed.

Where else you gonna put those squealing 18-year-old groupies?

3. Meet a doctor with incompetent help.

Making it to Celebrity Rehab with other songwriters requires Oxycontin.

4. Yes, GarageBand is all you need ... if you're female, blonde, amply endowed, under 25, and using Proactiv.

5. Practice your offended face.

Sooner or later somebody is going to call you a songwriter, and you'll need to say, "I'm a composer," with your offended face.

6. Buy a pickup.

No, you're not going to sing country for god's sake, what are you nuts? Internet piracy means you'll never earn a living doing this, so you'll need a place to sleep.

7. Do FAWM and 50/90 yearly.

We don't know why, just do it. (And send Burr money.)

8. One word: Guitar.

The other instruments are for losers.

9. Two words: Sheet music.

Fuggetabout it. Dots are for losers.

10. There are only 9 tips for songwriting.

DF Taylor

*David Taylor (or **df taylor** for the pretentious) is a Scottish songwriter. He writes songs of abject misery and occasional melody, and then lets people hear them. People have told him that they like these songs and so, David has continued to create.*

David's writing combines what he loves most: rock, pop, country and soul music.

Listen to his music at http://dftaylor.co.uk

1. Don't be afraid to steal (but make sure you use it well)

Avoid plagiarism but never be afraid to borrow and repurpose what's already out there.

If you hear a chord sequence that you love, or a riff that you know would sound amazing, but played in reverse order – go for it.

You define great songs by the end product, not by how you came up with it.

As long as you've not just taken the chords, melody and sentiment of say, Meet Me at Mary's Place by Sam Cooke, and blatantly written around it – then you're all good. And anyway, Springsteen did that first (and didn't even credit poor, dead Sam).

2. Serve the song, not your ego – the music

I know, I know – you've got amazing chops, can whip off a wailing solo in seconds and your modulations between key changes make Andrew Lloyd-Webber regret ever writing Phantom of the Opera – but, it's too late, you've drowned your song in a tempest of tacky bling.

A three-chord rocker that suddenly becomes a Gregorian chant may seem the height of sophistication and musical daring, but it just sounds like you're a dick who thinks you're smarter than your audience. You're not.

3. Serve the song, not your ego – the lyrics

Just because you can write poetry like Keats doesn't mean you should. Consider both the setting and the message of your song. If you've written a gin-soaked country-ballad, then a sudden burst of Keats-ian expression and sensation may be a little out-of-place.

Make sure your method never gets in the way of your message.

4. Never doubt the power of trying something new

I'm best at writing pop-rock songs, but, there's a real value in ignoring everything you're good at and doing something that's just different.

It could be using a different instrument or tuning, it could be a different musical style, and it could even be trying to insert Keats into a three-chord rocker with a Gregorian chant in the middle eight.

Even if it doesn't work, it might help you to figure out what you really want to do.

5. Follow your muse

I'm not a believer that the muse is a spiritual entity beaming inspiration into your fingers and larynx, but there is good advice in the theory. Write what feels right – if it's all sad, low-key acoustic ballads; don't fight it because you 'should' write an upbeat rocker.

Be creative and stretch yourself if you've got the desire, but don't force it just because someone tells you that you should.

6. Be true

Actors (good ones at any rate) say that good acting isn't about pretending to be someone else, or faking it – it's about finding the truth in a character and using that to make them real for the audience.

Writing a song is similar – look for what's emotionally true about it. You don't need to have experienced what you're writing about, (in my song, The Dark Sea, the protagonist drowns

and, as best I can tell, I haven't ever drowned, sailed on a stormy night or been Irish), you just have to identify with the sentiment of it.

7. Never doubt the power of harmonies

I don't care what sort of songs you write, whether it's vastly inappropriate or if you've never listened to the Beach Boys – harmonies fucking rock. You can improve any with their presence by a factor of 10-20.

Boring chorus? Add harmonies. Can't think of decent lyrics? Add harmonies. Can't play guitar well enough to solo? That's right, add harmonies. Harmonies solve every musical problem, and a large amount of real-world ones too.

8. Three is enough, four is acceptable if well-chosen, and five is just boring

You think you've got a lot to say but, trust me, no one wants to listen. Songs including four or five verses are just no fun. I don't care if Dylan did it – you are not Dylan.

Three verses is a good amount and here's why: introduction, expansion, resolution. That's a perfect way to tell a three act story. In addition, your chorus can carry the main theme of the song, and the middle eight (if used) can help you change the song's overall meaning.

More than anything, it's good discipline. Say more with less and, when you do need more, you'll know it's for the right reasons and that you'll make a good job of it.

9. Choose your weapon

People may scoff and say that how you record isn't as important as what you record, but I respectfully disagree.

I've recorded using almost every approach out there, and I'm happiest when I'm home, with my guitars around me, my microphone set up and Nuendo running. Add in Guitar Rig 3 and BFD and there's nothing else I need. By being comfortable with my tools, I experiment more, I work faster and I spend my time being creative instead of being a technician.

So, choose your weapon and focus on making your music, not trying to record it.

10. Do it because you love it

This is a purely personal perspective, but the best songs come from love. That doesn't mean they're about love, but because you love writing songs. If you do it out of a desire just to show you can do it, it'll be awful without fail because it'll never ring true.

Painting by numbers isn't the same as painting from life. It looks the same on first glance, but it's shallow, less compelling and less interesting ultimately. Writing by numbers has the same effect – it'll fool you on first listen, but with each further repeat, you hear less and less.

Matt Erion 'StoneWing'

Matt Erion is a composer, bandleader, jazz bass player, and leader of the Matt Erion Trio
http://twitter.com/stonewing

Inspirational

1. You can do it

Put pen to paper, roll tape, or whatever. You can write a song. Maybe not a great song, but don't be afraid to write. You may never play or sing like your idols either. That doesn't stop you from playing or singing. The top of the charts should not be your goal, just write.

2. Put your life into it

Songwriting or composition is all about expressing what you don't have words for.

3. Spend some time with your ideas.

Some songs write in a short time. I've had some that have taken months to come in. It'll get there when it gets there. Don't force it.

4. You are a composer

See #1 above. Don't let anyone diminish the value of your work, especially by comparing it to someone else's work. I may not be Stravinsky, but it doesn't change the fact that I'm a composer. I'm just not a "famous" composer. So what.

Workflow

5. Have some rules.

Even if you break them later, composition is about prioritizing and choosing ideas from the literally limitless possibilities. A filter can help focus an idea into something concrete.

6. Never get caught without being able to write.

I use staff paper in my writing. There are plenty of ideas I've scratched down on a post-it, only to put into notation later. If you only use recording, then find a pocked recorder or an iPhone.

7. Distill influences

You probably love some songs already. Figure out why they work, or what section/melody/chords are uniquely that artist. Begin to use those distillates in your own work. Analyze everything.

8. Try a new method

I use notation. So sometimes to mix it up, I might just sing melodies into a recorder and transcribe and edit later.

Post-Writing

9. Beware of "Vampires".

Some ideas are really powerful in the middle of the night. The next day (or sober) they don't sound so great. Don't be afraid to edit or table the idea as necessary

10. Allow the input of others.

Bandmates, or even people via social media. Invite comment, get a thick skin and at least consider ideas. Sometimes it's simple as "let's put another chorus in here".

XEW

Singing since she could make a sound, XEW focuses on writing and vocals, applying her unique musical sensibility and pure style to a wide range of genres, often in collaboration with similarly creative musicians. Several of her songs with J-Punch were picked up by many top DJ's and remixed onto various projects and compilations by R:Tem, Fretwell, Micah, Presslab, Gee and Lighter, and Mike Hiratzka. "Amazing Grace" from her debut project is enshrined in the Library of Congress as part of the Chasanoff/Elozua collection. Her recent release "Retrospective" caps 20 years of songwriting and 10 years of recording.

http://xewmusic.com/

1. Be organized

Develop a way to organize all of your writings and recordings. The folder is your friend! Have one place to keep all of your scribble paper scraps & type them up often.

2. Have many ways to generate ideas

Sometimes just thinking isn't enough. You need to have other ways to make things click. Go on "word hunts", uses dictionaries, thesauruses, encyclopedia resources of all types, rhyming books, listen to others for life stories, etc.

3. Learn an instrument no matter how old you are

You are never to old to learn an instrument or a new one. It can expand your songwriting abilities exponentially

4. Schedule time to write

Time is hardly ever on our side and life can get hectic. Schedule time to write, even if its just a short time each day or week.

5. Listen to others music for inspiration

Don't be afraid to listen to others music. There are many chords, etc that are used in many songs. Also use others music to trigger an emotion (in your self) that you are looking to bring out in your own work.

6. Buy lots of loose leaf

Always keep a notebook or paper nearby. My preference has become folders with loose leaf so I can sort things as needed.

7. Write everything you are thinking while writing

No matter how silly you may think it is, write it down if you are thinking it while trying to write a song. It may inspire something else later. Write all of your thoughts, they will prove helpful later when that grand idea you started gets scrapped and you feel the need to go back to square one.

8. Collaborate

Two or more heads in a project can lead to some really interesting works, things that you might not of thought about on your own.

9. Always write, even when you feel the Muse isnt around

Even if some of your songs aren't the greatest, writing and creating needs practice to become better. Write and create as often as you can.

10. Don't be afraid to go back to revisit & rewrite, & maybe even ask for feedback

Sometimes we feel our creation is the greatest thing ever. But we might need to have another ear take a listen to find things we missed while we were knee deep in the creative process. We are all human and miss things sometimes.

Calum Carlyle

My name's Calum Carlyle. I've been a performing songwriter for many years now, and have been in several bands of various types. I've self produced three CD albums and been featured on various other CDs as well, and I help to run "Out of the Bedroom", Edinburgh's longest running open mic night, requiring all performers to perform material they've written themselves.

www.calumcarlyle.co.uk
www.myspace.com/calumcarlyle
www.facebook.com/CalumCarlyle

1. Take notes.

Actual notes, whether it's recording you singing something into a Dictaphone or mobile 'phone, or if it's a notepad, or just some scrap paper you had in your jacket pocket, do not assume that you will remember that gem of a hook line that you thought of on the bus or in the queue at the post office. You probably won't. Then again, you may not use most of the stuff you take notes on, that's okay, but if you don't note it down, you will probably forget it.

2. Break the rules.

You need to know some rules to do this. A lot of songwriters shun rules, because it's their creative freedom et cetera. This will probably result in a lot of same-sounding songs. Know some rules, scales, rhythmic techniques, whatever. Learning about music's always going to be useful, and once you know the rules you can start to break them intelligently, and only when you choose to do so.

3. Songwriting isn't just about writing a song.

It's about the arrangement (is the song an eighteen verse folk marathon? Or is it a complicated melodic metal piece with variations in every section?), it's about the instrumentation sometimes, it's about the actual recording and production (a good song will show through, but a good recording and production always helps to showcase a good song).

4. Learn how to do it yourself.

You will meet people all the time who try and tell you you have to get others to record you, or to play or sing your music, or to mix or master your music, or to promote and market your music, or to make your website and you may choose to get others to do some or all of these things, no harm done. Still, it'll be quicker in the long run, cheaper, and closer to your intentions if you do it yourself. Make the effort to gain these skills, and you'll at least know what you're looking for even if you eventually get someone else to do them for you, though you may just choose to do them all yourself of course!

5. Know why you're writing.

Is this a get rich quick scheme? Go and check out the chances of getting rich by writing songs before you take another step. Actually in any venture it pays to have a think about what your reasons are for going into it.

6. Collaborate

Even if it's just collaborating in terms of swapping comments and opinions, though it could also be a musical songwriting collaboration or getting a band together. This'll help your songwriting no end, getting feedback and the chance to work with others stimulates your creative juices like nothing else. I've found the community at www.fawm.org to be invaluable when it comes to this sort of collaboration.

7. Perform.

At least perform at an open mic night, and not just any open mic night, go to a few and see which ones feel good to you. Find out where you can perform in your area to a friendly crowd and go from there. You'll naturally make friends and get recommendations of other performing opportunities. This is very gratifying once you get into it, and it can lead to collaboration and feedback on your songs.

8. Be totally interested in music.

Get into the bands in your town, buy/swap CDs and weblinks with them. Go to local band gigs. Bring your friends along. There's tons of good music, you're not doing it out of pity, you're doing it to hear good music. And what's more, if you support other artistes, they'll often support you too.

9. Get good on your instruments.

Yes, that was instruments plural. This includes your voice, unless you have a singer willing to sing your songs for you. Broaden your horizons, and perhaps take some lessons in at least one of the instruments you play. The more varied your perspective is, the more tools you have as a songwriter.

10. Have fun!

Music is for having fun to. If you're not having fun, nobody else will. Even with sad songs, or angry songs, you'll be proud of them if they're good songs, and get satisfaction when people say they like your songs. But this is because you like your songs and enjoy writing, playing and singing them. Fun is really the bottom line, in my opinion.

Bill Hayes

Bill Hayes (also known as "Morti", now releasing music as "bill.mu") likes to make noises with guitars, sometimes those noises come together to make songs which he likes to release for your listening pleasure. His style has been described most accurately as "progressive indie rock" but his regular forays into different genres make him hard to pin down. He is a committed Christian but rarely writes explicit worship music. Most of his lyrical inspiration comes from his general unease with life. However underpinning all his music is a relentless optimism and an assurance that things will work out in the end.

http://bill.mu/

1. Abstract Lyrics

You want your audience to be able to identify with your songs and your lyrics. The secret is to be vague, allow people to interpret your song in a way that matters to them.

Of course if you're writing a political song to put across a particular point of view then that goes out the window; writing for people who agree with you is okay but you can't expect to write for people who've shared your life experience. Like all tips this does not apply to all songs, there is a lot to be said for a song that reveals intimate personal details about a songwriter, but too many of those and you alienate your audience.

2. KISS

KISS is a term used in the world of computer programming to mean "keep it simple, stupid" and it applies for hit singles as well. If your intention is a hit single (and for at least one of your songs it probably should be) then it needs to be straightforward.

Being able to play amazing riffs on your guitar upside-down while it's on fire and has no strings is great but there's no need to do it in every song. Beauty can come from simplicity and catchy immediate tunes certainly come from simplicity.

Try imposing limits on number of chords, speeds you can play solos, complex lyrical ideas, etc and break it down to a funky riff and a memorable phrase over a simple chord progression in 4/4 time. See what happens.

3. Write A Hit Single

Yeah, I know, the music in the charts is mostly rubbish. Try to join them. Why? Because there's something that they have that your songs might not, a sense of immediate appeal. Something about your song that makes the listener pay attention and start humming your songs on the bus. That's usually a cool hook, be it a memorable vocal line or a great riff.

Pay attention to which of your songs you start humming to yourself while you're making sandwiches or whatever, that might be a song that wants more attention to become that hit single. All your other songs can be experimental atonal jazz odysseys, but when you try to write a hit single you tend to pick up on something you might otherwise have missed that could give your experimental atonal jazz odysseys that extra appeal.

4. Learn Music Theory

I know, it's terribly boring, you have to play scales over and over again and who wants to do that? Surely it just restricts your music to the accepted norms and limits your creativity?

Not even slightly. By learning music theory you can add a whole bunch of tools to your songwriting toolbox. I resisted instrument lessons for years but there came a point where I simply started to run out of ideas.

Since taking lessons I can add more notes to improvisations without hitting the wrong ones all the time and this has improved the variety in my songs immensely. I also wrote a song using only quartal harmony, which I wouldn't have known about had I not taken some lessons, and it sounds completely different to any other song I have written.

Quartal harmony and scales alone have opened up whole new possibilities and there's so much more out there.

Being self-taught is a good thing but if you see a band who can do something that you can't, the root of that is likely some music theory knowledge that you're missing. Of course some of you are grade 8 pianists and I just wasted your time, sorry about that.

5. Renovate Your Style

Everything changes all the time. The strongest buildings in the world will either crumble over time or they'll be renovated, new parts will be added to the old architecture so that the beauty of the old architecture can remain.

Your music is the same, if you have a defined style and you stick to it then it will stagnate. It will lose the power and excitement it once had. Keep the vision for your music the same, by all means, but to preserve that vision (the architecture behind your music) you need to occasionally renovate everything around it to keep it fresh.

6. Work With Other Songwriters

Music is often a very personal thing and you have a particular way you want to go about doing it. That's fine, but if you become too insular you end up writing songs that are only meaningful to you.

If you write with other songwriters once in a while it breaks the mould and you learn new ways to better express yourself in a way that others can relate to. FAWM (www.fawm.org) is a great way to do this as you can collaborate with people all over the world and through this you'll learn to do things with your own music that you never thought possible.

7. Write A Poem, Write An Instrumental, Keep Them Separate

You can probably write a pretty great song with both lyrics and music that work together to form a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. Cool.

Stop doing that, write an instrumental piece of music and then write a poem completely separate to that. If you can learn to keep your music exciting and hold your audience with just music or just words then your subsequent songs will be all the better for it.

Instrumental music has a different skill set to song writing where melody and mood is king and you'll be surprised how much you can say without using any words at all. Once you bring that knowledge back into your songs you'll be able to write better songs that have a wider appeal.

Similar with poetry, poems are different from lyrics anyway but the goal here is to learn to hold attention with words, rhythm and intonation alone. If your music and words can touch people when they're kept separate, how much more will they be able to do so when you put them together? Some people listen to lyrics, some people listen to music, you want to appeal to both those groups.

8. Write A Long Song

Okay, so you can hold the audience's attention for three minutes, good stuff. What about eight minutes? Twenty? An hour? Many people, myself included, think Mike Oldfield's best work is Amarok. It's one track that's exactly an hour long.

You might not want to reach an hour but try to write something that's longer than what you usually write and find ways to keep the audience's attention with the same song. Take the usual melody and vary it, use the opportunity to tell a story, whatever you like. Perhaps check out (some or all of) The Song of Hiawatha, a wonderful epic poem that keeps roughly the same rhythm throughout but still manages to be an amazing classic despite taking four hours to read aloud.

By learning to write something that keeps your audience captivated for a longer length of time you will have no problem doing it with your shorter songs. It also forces you to consider different song structures and learning when to bring a memorable motif back into an epic song so that it is still effective but doesn't outstay its welcome is a wonderful skill in itself.

9. Listen To People

Some of the most popular songs that I have written have come from listening to other peoples' stories and essentially ripping them off for my own ends (with their permission, mostly, or abstracted enough that they don't know I used their story to begin with).

Your own life experience is always going to be limited and if that's the only thing that fuels your music then you're going to get repetitive really quickly. A band I like recently released an album in which almost every song is about the lead singer feeling weak and run-down. Writing a song with that theme is fine but if it's a whole album then you might find your audience switching off fairly quickly. By learning from other peoples' life experiences you can write songs that are more relevant to a greater number of people, which will increase the popularity and exposure of your music.

10. Keep It Fun

Writing and playing your own songs should be enjoyable, if you're not having fun with your songs then neither will anyone else. If you're taking all my advice and you get fed up with doing any one of those things then stop doing it for a bit, write for yourself, and then perhaps go back to it later. Nothing can inspire you to greater heights more than the enjoyment of your own music because if you enjoy it you want to do it more and you'll want to do it better.

I write music that I like, if other people happen to like it then great. With some songs you want to aim for mass appeal but the overarching factor that drives you to write should be your own enjoyment. If you wrote a song that you hate but everybody else seems to love then there's no shame in discarding it and moving on. If you have this situation then you successfully wrote a song people love. Well done, you can do it again, and you can do it with a song that you like as well. Chase your own enjoyment before anybody else's and that will be reflected in your music and others will enjoy it more.

Bart Helms

Bart Helms writes and performs jazzy roots music with The End Times Spasm Band when not working for Chain Smoking Records.

He spent 2009 attempting to write one song a week at www.52songs52weeks.blogspot.com (but only earned a 50%).

1. Make time for writing.
I don't mean sit behind a piano from 9 to 5 like clockwork, but you need to leave space in your daily routine for your mind to wander. Don't fill up every spare minute with the TV on or the earbuds in. Be conscious of when your ideas come and don't rob yourself of those opportunities.

2. Read and read widely.
If you actually live a life interesting enough to endlessly inspire lyrics, you probably don't have time to read lists like this or even write songs. The rest of us need to draw on other peoples' lives, thoughts, and feelings – whether to write about them or respond to them. Since you'll be working with lyrics, I recommend reading. Read everything you can get your hands on. Then looking for more.

3. Find an audience.
Songwriting is a lot like learning a language: it's not something you can do all on your own. Go to open mics, join a band willing to play some of your songs, or join a songwriting circle. Consider every form of feedback they give you: with their words, eyes, tips, or feet. Some people's tastes will differ from yours, but don't use that as your default excuse.

4. Write with a plan.
Don't rely on pure inspiration. Know where you want the song to start, where you want it to end, and what you want to happen in the middle. The best songs begin as an accident and then rely on skill to safely navigate the way home. Make it into a game if you have to. I like to make my songs into puzzles that I have to solve by picking odd topics and trying to find the human element within.

5. Write for your crap ratio.
Some portion of the songs you write will be crap. The ratio will decrease as you write more, but it will never reach zero. If you only write one song in a blue moon, it will be harder to let go of any given song - no matter how bad. By writing more than you need, you'll be less attached to the crap and more willing to toss it out.

6. Once you start, finish.
It might seem like a waste of time to finish a song that's clearly going nowhere, but you will at least learn discipline if not more. When it's done you can sweep it under the rug and forget about it, but it can eat at you if you leave it unfinished.

7. Learn standard song structures and chord progressions.
Most songwriters work from within conventions, even if they can't articulate them. Study other songs and how they're stitched together, then take your favorite parts and try to make new songs by sewing the best elements together. What you create will be really derivative at first, but eventually you'll be able to do this and still keep your unique voice.

8. Break rules one at a time.
Take a genre, pick an unwritten rule within it, and break it while leaving the rest of the rules alone. Not only might you end up with a new song, but you'll learn whether that rule is really a rule. If you break too many rules at once, it will be hard to tell why the song did or didn't work.

9. Learn to play by ear and learn to improvise.
Both are about translating what you hear into notes at your fingertips. Being good at either means a quicker, smoother songwriting process. Both skills can be learned and are well worth the time and effort.

10. Use economy.
If you can't say it in three verses, you probably aren't saying anything of value. Consider the impact of every word, and find ways to express your ideas in as few lines as possible.

Scott Lake

Scott Lake is a Christian songwriter from Colorado, USA

http://rockstarnot.rekkerd.org/

1. Choose a cell phone that has an easy to use voice recorder feature.

There is no better tool for recording that melody, rhythm, lyrical twist, etc. that come at the strangest times of the day. On my previous cell phone, I had this mapped to a 2-button push op. I could do without looking. My entire FAWM 2008 kid's song catalog was spawned from ideas I recorded on that thing - many of the ideas recorded while driving.

2. Use that voice recorder feature - playing back your snapshots of your muse, when you have access to better writing tools, instruments, etc.

3. Write often and when it seems inconvenient. Songwriting takes practice just like learning an instrument takes practice.

4. Steal chord sequences and patterns - rewrite them in a different style with lyrics you recorded on your cell phone.

5. Read Errol's list (page 5)

6. Write under self-imposed deadlines.

7. Learn 2 instruments.

8. Learn to use recording software

9. Write in more than one style

10. FAWM - do it.

Jeff Shattuck

In the first month of 2006, I fell in the night and fractured my skull. According the medical reports, I suffered a subdural hematoma on my cerebellum, which is a fancy way of saying I bruised my brain. Happily, the cerebellum doesn't seem to have much to do with cognitive abilities; sadly, it has everything to do with balance. So, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, I'm dizzy and a touch nauseated. A full recovery is expected, but it could be years, if ever, a thought that, I confess, scares me. An odd side effect of the injury, however, seems to be a rekindling of my love for songwriting. My blog – Cerebellum Blues – is my chronicle of the making of my first ever album. And while I deeply wish I did not have to have hurt myself so profoundly to get back into songwriting, I am glad to once again be chasing my muse.

Hope you enjoy being along for the ride!

http://www.cerebellumblues.com/

1. Be able to Sing in Key

If you're gong to write songs with melodies, this is critical, I think, yet an amazing number of songwriters cannot do this.

2. Know at least one chordal instrument pretty well

For better or for worse, pop/rock songs tend to be single note melodies set against rhythmic chord progressions, and if you want to write in this genre, you should know how to create those chord progressions. I like the guitar, but piano/keys should do the trick, too.

If you're going to write lyrics, learn how to write prose
The best book on writing I have ever bought is The Writer's Art, by James Kilpatrick. It's not about lyrics, but writing period, and it has helped me immensely over the years. Books on lyrics are probably helpful, but I've never found a good one. Rhyming dictionaries are a great idea, especially Rhymezone, which can be accessed from a smart phone or computer.

3. Forget the Tau, you want the Daw

Time waits for no one, so anything you can do to accelerate your writing process, do it. Maybe you're fastest playing into a cassette deck, I dunno, but for me, nothing beats a DAW (digital audio workstation). My fave is Pro Tools

4. Learn from the people you admire

If there are songwriters out there you really admire, learn how to play your favorite songs by them. Write down the structures they use (verse, chorus, etc.), borrow, steal (a little bit) and hold your stuff up to theirs. Sure, you might never be able to say your stuff is as good, but does it at least compare on some basic levels. It should.

5. Have a few brutally honest critics you trust (and be willing to make changes based on criticism)

Unless you only plan to play your songs for you, yourself and you, find a few people whose judgment you trust and play them your stuff. Do it for strangers, even, say at a song-screening. But here's the most important part: listen to what they say and be prepared to admit that they might be right. Obviously, you need to stay true to yourself, but if others around you are offering good advice, take it.

6. Have a creative brief for each song

I confess, I'm one of those people for whom a song has to make sense. Not every song, I can listen to works by others that totally mystify me, but for my own compositions, I have to know what they're about. To do this, once I've made some progress on a tune, I clarify and commit to its meaning by completing the sentence "this song is about _____." I try fill in the blank as specifically as possible, while keeping my answer to one sentence. In advertising, this sentence would be the Key Message in the creative brief, which is the document given to art directors and copywriters at the beginning of every project.

7. Keep you antennae up at all times and have a way of capturing whatever you pick up.

Ideas for songs can come anytime, anywhere, and you have to be ready. You can't expect your ideas to come when you have time for them. For me, it's a Blackberry. I always have mine with me and, since my ideas tend to start as lyrics, it's perfect. If your ideas are more melodic, a phone is still key, as you can call yourself and leave a singing voicemail.

8. Sing it in your head

This last one is a doozey and not one I can always do, but I find it to be hugely helpful. If you can sing your song to yourself – in your head, no instrument – and it sounds pretty good, you're onto something. If you can't, you're probably not finished by a long shot.

9. Learn a little theory

You don't need to be the kind of person who can play an F#mb6, but you should know the basics around the I, IV, IV progression and how to modulate a bit. Not absolutely necessary – but helpful.

10. Read *Songwriters on Songwriting* by Paul Zollo

The best book on songwriting I have ever read. It's not a "how to", just a "how others do" and deeply great. Get yours here.

11. Kill your Babies

If you are working on a song and there's a part of it that you LOVE but know in your heart does not fit, kill it. Hard to do, but oh-so-worth it.

Flav

www.myspace.com/flavrs

1. **Write always.**

   Write everything down in one notebook; a nice turn of phrase, an interesting sentence or thought. Overtime this will grow into a priceless archive.

2. **Look at the racing guide;**

   horses' names provide an inexhaustible source of amazing song titles.

3. **Pepper your lyrics with words from other languages**

   - or invent your own beautiful sounding words but keep it sparse, special and surprising.

4. **Within song lyrics, leave breathing room for mystery and ambiguity**

   Allow the listener to bring their imagination and interpretation in.

5. **Personify things and objects, especially things in the natural world**

   Give them gender, personality and consciousness. Give them emotion and desire.

6. **Deliberately don't rhyme**

   Actively avoid rhyming couplets.

7. **Deliberately rhyme**

   Create the greatest ever rhyming couplet.

8. **The greatest thing with words is whatever you write can't be wrong.**

   The words are always yours, your words are always correct.

9. **Terrorize the rules of grammar**

   corrupt word order and sentence structure; play with tense, suffix and prefix.

10. **Follow the rules religiously while deliberately striving to break them.**